

FROM PERIPHERAL TO COSMOPOLITAN

The Crisis-Images in Miguel Gomes ARABIAN NIGHTS

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Abstract

*The ever-elusive essence and idea of Europe are once again questioned and debated because of its most recent crisis, which began with the sovereign debt crisis of the peripheral Eurozone economies. This article intends to be a reflection on what it is to be part of Europe as subpart/division/peripheral border of it, developing it around two levels of analysis: firstly, the artistic response to the events and social disruptions that took place on the European crisis and, in particular, through the way some cinema has looked at them; and secondly, one in which this cinematographic artistic response is created from the European periphery, and in this singular case, Portugal. Its object of analysis is the film *The 1001 Nights*, by the Portuguese filmmaker Miguel Gomes and divided into 3 volumes: *The Restless One* (2015), *The Desolate One* (2015) and *The Enchanted One* (2015).*

Keywords: Europe, Portugal, crisis, artistic response, cinema

Part 1 - Doubt of Europe. Portugal: part-crisis of Europe-crisis

Between the closure and the opening, and since 2010, nine years-crisis have passed and nine years-crisis have been made, of a decade that has stood as the mobile transfiguration of the doubt about what Europe is as a figure of itself, transnational form and idea of a land, a set of nation-states and a multiplicity of peoples, citizenships and identifications. In his book *Penser l'Europe/Thinking Europe*, Edgar Morin wrote about this doubt of *the being Europe*, not forgetting to make explicit the dualities that shape it, since if we seek the essence of Europe, we will find nothing more than an evanescent and aseptic "european spirit". Believing to unveil its authentic attribute is to hide an opposite attribute,

not less European. Thus, if Europe is the law, then it is also the force; if it is spirituality, it is also materiality; if it is moderation, it is also *hubris*, the excess; if it is reason is also the myth, included in the idea of reason. Europe is an uncertain notion, born of the mess, with indefinite boundaries, of variable geometry, suffering slips, ruptures, metamorphoses. It is therefore a matter of questioning the idea of Europe precisely in what it has to be uncertain, hazy, contradictory, in order to try to extract its complex identity. (Morin, 1988, p.33) A binary balance and an apparent fragile equilibrium between impossibility and possibility of defining an *essence* and of it an *idea* of Europe are also underlined by Peter Sloterdijk in his *If Europe Awakes*, when he states that, in spite of everything,

the question of the essence of Europe is not mysterious or unanswerable. The answer will jump in sight, as soon as we stop worrying about sterile questions about Europe's true frontiers and ethnic entities. There is no doubt that Europe has neither a substantial popular base, nor strong borders to the east and the southeast, nor an unequivocal religious identity. But it has a typical "form" and a very own dramatic motif that, for most of its history, is imposed through unmistakable scenes. It suffices to adopt the optics of a playwright in order to discern clearly the broad lines of the European play. The question should not be: who, according to what criteria and traditions, belongs to a "true Europe"?... but: what scenes do the Europeans play in their decisive historical moments? What are the ideas that animate them, the illusions that mobilize them? How has Europe achieved its driving history and by what means does it keep moving? Where does Europe's power and unity run the risk of failing? (Sloterdijk, 2008, p. 34)

and, even more historicizing, he lists a major group of historical figures who acted in the *European drama* to which he refers, writing that

if to be European means to present in the theater of the improvisation of history post-Roman imperial entities, the generation to come will have to return to show how it behaves like the Empire. Even the last translation of

this impossible-to-reproduce Empire will necessarily be a chapter of the sinuous and extremely charged history inaugurated five thousand years ago by the transmitters of the Empire of the Old Europe: the early Roman bishops, the Carolingians, the Ottomans and, following these, the Hohenstaufens, the Habsburgs in their Austrian and Spanish lineages, as well as the missionary orders, the adventurous capitalists and other British human flesh merchants, the Bourbons and the Tzars, as well as the charismatic emperors and usurpers of modernity, Napoleon I, William II, Lenin and Hitler. (Sloterdijk, 2008, p.47)

To question Europe today, not only its word-name, but also its identity idea, is to recall, as a possible reflective starting point, Jacques Derrida's *Letter to Europe - Double Memory*, one in which he addressed himself to her as the "*old Europe*", but also as the "*old new Europe*", guardian of its double memory, "*the good and the bad*" (Derrida, RFC, 2014, p. 471) This (and his) New Europe, Derrida wrote, would be one that

guards its luminous memory: the philosophical, the democracy, the Lights, and even what is called, in a very dubious way, the "secularization". May she also keep her nightly memory, the memory of all the crimes she committed in her history, which were committed in her name, all these forms of hegemony, of colonialism, and in the course of this century all the monstrosities of European totalitarianism: fascism, nazism, stalinism. (Derrida, RFC, 2014, p.471)

Such a dual memory, positive and negative simultaneously, knowing and acting, would be and will be a matrix of questioning of what Europe is as space-identity and a social, economic, philosophical and political space-structure. And there will not have been a clearer moment for this questioning than the one that emerged in the course of the European sovereign debt crisis, a crisis that can be read and debated from the radical political-sociological matrix with which Maurizio Lazzarato criticizes the debtor/creditor relationship in his blunt *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on The Neoliberal Condition*, and in which he states that

the debt economy has deprived the immense majority of Europeans of political power, which had already been diminished through the concessions of representative democracy. It has deprived them of a growing share of the wealth that past struggles had wrestled from capitalist accumulation. And, above all, it has deprived them of the future, that is, of time, time as decision-making, choice, and possibility. (Lazzarato, 2011, p.8)

and which brought with it the phantasmatic specters of nationalist deviations and a re-centering - which is at the same time a real decentering - to its "political-financial" central field, leaving even more peripheral those already on its sides, not only lines and but also land and citizens, economically fragile and disconnected from decisions that are more of the interest of the nations of European centrality than the almost continental whole that is called the European Union, since, for this center, what seems to be obvious is that "*the true causes of the repeated crises lie in the excessive demands of the governed (especially those of Southern Europe), who want nothing more than to laze about*" (Lazzarato, 2011, p.10) when, and more than ever, what seems to be reflected is its own mirror-face, that of a

neoliberal power bloc cannot and does not want to "regulate" the "excesses" of finance because its political program continues to be based on the choices and decisions that brought us the latest crisis. Instead, with its threat of sovereign debt default, it seeks to follow through on a program it has been fantasizing about since the 1970s: reduce wages to a minimum, cut social services so that the Welfare State is made to serve its new "beneficiaries" - business and the rich - and privatize everything. (Lazzarato, 2011, p.10)

Starting from these premises, this article intends to be a reflection on what it is to be a subpart of Europe as part/division/peripheral border of it, developing it around two levels of analysis: first, the artistic response to events and social disruptions that have resulted from the European crisis, and particularly from the way some cinema has looked at them; and secondly, one in which this

cinematographic artistic response is created from the European periphery, and in this singular case, Portugal.

Part 2 - Film analysis (search for crisis-images)

Thus, and for an artistic reflection on the crisis years of Europe and its part Portugal, the object of analysis chosen is the film *The 1001 Nights*¹, by the Portuguese filmmaker Miguel Gomes and divided into 3 volumes: *O Inquieto/The Restless One*² (2015), *O Desolado/The Desolate One*³ (2015) and *O Encantado/The Enchanted One*⁴ (2015). Ambitious, raw, delirious, social, the

¹ The film is a European co-production (Portugal / France / Germany / Switzerland), encompassing the producing companies O SOM E A FÚRIA, SHELLAC SUD, BOX PRODUCTIONS, AGAT FILMS and ARTE France Cinéma and ZDF/ARTE, with a production year of 2015. Its general synopsis is: "In Portugal — a European country in crisis — a film director proposes to build fictional stories from the miserable reality he is immersed in. However, failing to find meaning in his work, he cowardly runs away and leaves the beautiful Scheherazade to stand in his shoes. She will require enthusiasm and courage so as not to bore the King with sad stories of this country. As nights go past, restlessness leads to desolation and in turn to enchantment! Therefore Scheherazade organizes the stories she tells the King in three volumes. She begins like this: "It hath reached me, O auspicious King, that in a sad country among all countries..."

² The synopsis of the first volume is as follows: "in which Scheherazade tells of the restlessness that befell the country: "It hath reached me, O auspicious King, that in a sad country among all countries, where people dream of mermaids and whales, and unemployment is spreading. In certain places, forests burn into the night despite the falling rain; men and women long to set out to sea in the middle of Winter. Sometimes there are animals that talk although it is highly improbable that they are listened to. In this country, where things are not what they appear to be, men of power promenade on camels and hide permanent and shameful erections; they await the moment when taxes are collected so they can pay a certain wizard whom..." And seeing the morning break, Scheherazade fell silent.". As it regards its technical specifications, the first volume has the following: Duration: 02' 05"; Exhibition format: DCP (Digital Cinema Package); Cinematographic format: 2:40 scope; Negative format: 16 mm, 35 mm, color; Sound: 5.1.

³ The synopsis of the second volume is as follows: "in which Scheherazade tells of how desolation invaded men: "It hath reached me, O auspicious King, that a distressed judge will cry instead of giving out her sentence on a night when all three moons are aligned. A runaway murderer will wander through the land for over forty days and will teletransport himself to escape the Police while dreaming of prostitutes and partridges. A wounded cow will reminisce about a thousand-year-old olive tree while saying what she must say, which will sound none less than sad! The residents of a tower block in the suburbs will save parrots and piss inside lifts while surrounded by dead people and ghosts; including in fact a dog that...". And seeing the morning break, Scheherazade fell silent. — "Damned tales! If things continue this way my daughter will surely end up with her throat slit!" — the Grand-Vizier, Scheherazade's father, thinks in his palace in Bagdad.". As it regards its technical specifications, the second volume has the following: Duration: 02' 11"; Exhibition format: DCP (Digital Cinema Package); Cinematographic format: 2:40 scope; Negative format: 16 mm, 35 mm, color; Sound: 5.1.

⁴ The synopsis of the third volume is as follows: "In which Scheherazade doubts that she will still be able to tell stories to please the King, given that what she has to tell weighs three thousand tons. She therefore escapes from the palace and travels the kingdom in search of pleasure and enchantment. Her father, the Grand-Vizier, arranges to meet her at the Ferris wheel and Scheherazade resumes her narration: "O auspicious King, in old shanty towns of Lisbon there was a community of bewitched men who, with all dedication and passion, devoted themselves to teaching birds to sing.... And seeing the morning break, Scheherazade fell silent.". As it regards its

film can be included in a contemporary trend of a very poignant European cinema

of the crisis [that] has produced an increasing number of films that share symbols, narrative strategies, and concerns, enriching post-2008 European cinema and contributing to the creation of a new image of Europe. A large number of recent productions are concerned with social issues (...) these films exert a veridical, pessimistic and disenchanted representation of contemporary European society; one that addresses social and political problems by representing a reality that is widely recognized as authentic on screen. (Kaklamanidou, Corbalán, 2018, p. 17 – 18)

What makes this film-trilogy particularly apt to illustrate the Portuguese crisis as part of the European crisis is the politics that its director Miguel Gomes follows. His politics is the translation of the figure-Portugal as a body of the periphery - economically, Portugal is a peripheral market in the ultra-financial market, it is sub-market in a concentric circle of a distant level - for a new embodiment as an artistic effort of approximation and as creator of a global mental and cultural sphere, since "*living always means building spheres, both on a small and a large scale, humans are the beings that establish globes and look out into horizons*" (Sloterdijk, 2011, p.28) and in which the fictional modes of the Other - of the East, the *1001 Arabian Nights* - are re-embodied in trans-relational modes of fiction, speaking of the Us, decentering of Europe-Space - while making use of the fabular structures of the Space-Orient. In the synopsis/note of intentions of the film, Miguel Gomes writes that

the narrative device in the storybook *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights* is relatively well-known and we count on being part of the popular collective imagination to focus mainly on the stories that Xerazade tells. And these will be different from those we know in the book. (Gomes, 2013, p. 1)

technical specifications, the third volume has the following: Duration: 02' 05"; Exhibition format: DCP (Digital Cinema Package); Cinematographic format: 2:40 scope; Negative format: 16 mm, 35 mm, video, color; Sound: 5.1.

The mention to the collective popular imagination is fundamental to Miguel Gomes' politics: there are no sharply divisive frontiers that cannot be overcome by stories that are common property and through which it is possible to operate spaces of creation that cluster together, allowing the exchange of forms and modes of fiction. That is why Miguel Gomes continues to write that

in the film, the stories that Xerazade tells will be spent in Portugal. Not in a contemporary Portugal to the tales of the book, but in Portugal today, in economic crisis and social boiling. The Portugal of 2013 and 2014, inhabited by rich and poor, powerful and insignificant, hardworking and unemployed, thieves and honest men. Marked by the consequences of the crisis, but also a delirious and excessive Portugal. What is wanted with this film is to do two things simultaneously: 1) to retake the deliriously fictional spirit of *The Thousand and One Nights* and above all to reaffirm with him and through him the bond that unites the king and Xerazade (the overwhelming need to tell stories), and (2) to draw a portrait or a chronicle of Portugal for a year (at a time when the country is subject to the effects of the "austerity" created by the Troika's financial assistance program). Fiction and social portraiture, flying carpets and strikes. Apparently dimensions that are not attached or at least that we get used to stow in different drawers. But imagery and reality could never live without the other (and Xerazade well knows). (Gomes, 2013, p.1)

To analyze the three volumes of the trilogy and to talk about the Portuguese crisis as part of the European crisis through them, is to look for some reflection of the human and socio-economic ills that affect Europe today: the excessive commodification of economic, social and labor relations, the disparity of income between the most and least well-off, the crisis of human values and the poor integration of migrants from other continents.

To this end, two sequences will be chosen from the three volumes that illustrate some of these problems - in the form of crisis-narratives and crisis-images - and those will be analyzed.

Analysis 1: from *The 1001 Nights, Volume 1 - The Restless One*, the sequence *The Bath of the Magnificent*. Between fiction and documentary, this sequence makes it liquid - it is not by chance that the sea and water are in it visual motifs - the most humane and personal face of the crisis, bringing the camera closer to the people who suffered from the economic and social shock caused by the Troika's financial assistance program.

The line that Miguel Gomes traverses, without any sorrow, between fiction and documentary, affirms a politics of reflection-mirror, intrinsic to a certain contemporary auteur cinema, one that configures a look, both graceful and crude, on its fictional forms/figures and that refers to a need to be piercing and displayer: the characters are that same characters, but also are the people who enter the movie as character-figures, but that quickly reconfigure themselves as characters-people, from the fictional form they pass to the real form and through it create a new figure-speech, the speech-crisis, which intrudes and weaves its own real fable on to the fictional film.

The fiction follows the vicissitudes of a syndicalist named Luís (Adriano Luz), a nervous man, explosive and suffering from tachycardia's, divided between the first need to calm his own heart rate - and his own imaginary, made of whale interiors - and a second one, to finance the feeding of the annual "Bath of the Magnificent", the first collective marine bath that takes place every January 1st. He is a sea-and-sand man, a thick sweater user with a wind-beaten face, a classist and vocalizer of all class struggles, but he is also taken by his apparent inability to pierce his own melancholy. The woes of others afflict him. He is the figure who guides us through the fiction and it is he who opens the door to the figures of the real, literally.

These persons, whom the film calls "Magnificent", knock on the door of the union headquarters. Luis opens it. To the first, he offers tea. He drinks it. Presents himself: "commercial director of profession, unemployed by condition". Soon one cuts from the character/actor to another regime of images, no more image-fable, but image-speech. He tells of his real story: the loss of employment in the

company that he helped to grow, the loss of savings due to the need to solve a loan he has endorsed, the delivery of the house to the bank and the return to the land of his parents, the difficulty in finding employment at the age of 50 years. As he speaks, the camera moves on from a long shot to an medium close shot, raw and clinical, wanting to show and approach the anguish, as real and clear as the record she films. Later, two more speeches of "Magnificent" she registers: that of a couple, also unemployed, forced to food assistance, to training courses, but certain of their mutual love and spaces of conjunction. And still another unemployed person of some duration, of broken health, but convinced of the necessity and truth of the realization of the human being through work.

The three discourses are three tracking shots, are shots and images-duration of words that are pungency and force. While filmic inlays of real stories, they shape this other need, that of leaving alive the memory of the suffering, of those who have lost what they had, all those who are beyond economic-financial calculations. This was the filmic and aesthetic politics of Miguel Gomes, in this sequence: to make it fluid and clear, because it is there, in what is said, the truth of what happened, the crisis that took everything away. There is, however, something profoundly positive and human about these discourses. Belief in something better.

When one arrives at the real "Bath of the Magnificent" and in it the actors are involved, no longer representing, but being between, the sound disappears, only the water and the bodies are left, looking and gesticulating towards the camera, breaking the line between the fiction and the documentary, showing more than just letting us see only a film.

Analysis Two: From *The 1001 Nights, Volume 2 - The Desolate One*, the sequence *The Owners of Dixie*. If the previously analyzed sequence referred to a hope, despite all its crudeness, these one already has a twilight imagery. Here, the figure that drives the connections and reconnections between the various characters is that of a small dog, named Dixie, who, throughout the sequence, moves from owner, from floor to floor, from tower to tower, in a Lisbon's

suburban neighborhood.

Once again, we have what we do not see: depression, melancholy, oblivion of a suburbanity to the top, shaped in the figure of the "Suburban Tower", high and divisive, made of cubes, parallelepipeds and other geometric solids that fit in order to separate and draw labyrinths, to enumerate and to name families by the number-letter of their respective apartments.

If the translation to the suburban is a phenomenon of economic migration and the form of a daily trek of wage-earners to the work-center and from this to the dormitory-spaces, made up of tiredness and repetitive alienation, it is not about them that this sequence speaks, but rather on those that are already permanently installed, crystallized and forgotten in the suburban tower. The forgotten suburban dwellers that these sequence follows are: an elderly couple, Humberto and Luísa, retired, sick and longing for older times and a young couple, Vasco and Vânia, former drug addicts and with very few means of subsistence. Through Dixie's races, they get to know each other and their lives are linked.

If clearly we still speak of crisis-images, made of low retirement pensions and total lack of income, the images that make this segment are images-melancholy, they are void lost gazes, repeated rituals, fumes, vapors, corridor curves, balconies too high. If Humberto hears the songs that are no longer heard, which had an "echo" placed in their voices and, therefore, so emotionally charged, he refers to the emptiness of making these other songs and albums, more current, now so digital and cold and no longer warm like his. The age gap and the disconnection of the generations are marked and creased in consumer products: the older ones advocate certain modes of manufacturing and reception and the young ones others. Humberto's vinyl will never be a teenager's digital file. Differentiation that equates to separation and this to oblivion.

In the end, Humberto and Luísa decide for the total oblivion. They kill each other. Before that, they offer Dixie to Vasco and Vânia. And the little canid - perhaps the only cheerful character in the segment - so soon loves his new owners as he forgets the old ones. Forgetfulness upon forgetfulness. The pact of

suicide, not said, but alluded, is perceived by the young couple. Despite their warnings, only 16 days after their death, the bodies of Humberto and Luísa are found. They were forgotten, in their geometric figure called apartment, the box inside the tower. Dixie ends up migrating to other owners. Runner, panting and happy, the positive denial of suburban negativity.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the two sequences, which sought to find some of the crisis-images, which are revealing of the real crisis-narratives, both the most apparently social and the most clearly personal, what can be left to a reflection is: first, the need for artistic responses that capture the meaning and the perceptions of the times, what Miguel Gomes seems to achieve, in his merging of the fantastic imaginary, of fiction and documentary; secondly, the ability to - always from the periphery, always from what is forgotten - achieve a *story of stories* that can be architected from and to a broad cosmopolitanism, as we understand it today, as a politics and an act of openness to the world; third, that in what concerns the European doubt, what this film presents as its political answer is one that stresses the need to return to a relational and social matrix that is such as to be pan-inclusive, a return to a *collective of persons*, one that makes in itself, the *collective-continent* that is a real union of Europe, since

as soon as Europe awakens, the questions of truth will return to the great politics. In the long term, Europe's success will depend on the ability of Europeans to believe in their rights to success. The formulation of human rights includes a cipher that designates the right to success and that they oppose to the whole world. When times change, the meaning of these rights must be expressed again. Europe's deepest thought is that one must resist contempt. If this reflection is inescapable, it is because it also remains true for the tired and defeated beings. In the last translation of the Empire in Europe, its refusal of the contempt of the human, contempt that inhabits all imperialisms, must thus assume a political form. (Sloterdijk, 2008, p.59)

The response through art is always one that aims at the creation of an aesthetic so that it is in the act of being in the world. The possibility of a political form here is that of a *politics of appreciation*, towards the other, European and non-European, especially cosmopolitan and multi-continental.

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